

The School for Life and the Academy in Sorø (1838)

Excerpt #2

For, as a people who know their history, we realise that the enemy is more dangerous the less we know him. And we give a hearty laugh at the blind hatred which refuses to learn from its enemies, despite that being the only benefit and pleasure one may have of them. So the question is simply that just as our peasant farmers are undeniably best served by sticking to Saxo in Danish, so will the Northerner only gain any advantage from Latin when no one slaves for it, but only a few at a time master it and force it to slave for us.

I cannot embark here upon the organisation of the Danish High School, since, as with all things human, we must be born first before we can know which bonnet suits our head. Least of all can we know how tall we shall be, or what Time will teach us. So I would really not have mentioned it, had we not become so used to it in the Schools for Death that we can barely imagine a school whose entire path is not laid down from the outset. That of course is easily done with 'the art of letters', which consists of learning a certain number of words and rules by heart and at best scrutinizing and copying such fixed and stone-dead things as books! There is no possibility there of drawing on the *development* of life, which allows for no stagnation and cannot follow other rules than natural laws, or of drawing on the *enlightenment* of life, which must be tempered by life as it really is. We can therefore honestly say that in a People's Civic High School for our day, and our children's day, there ought to be an opportunity to learn Foreign Languages, Mathematics, History, and all that the individual wishes for, and has the time to apply himself to either for its usefulness or its enjoyment. With a Royal Danish High School in Sorø this would more or less come of its own accord.

But the main issue - what is living, what is common to all, what is universal, which must be the soul and purpose of such a high school: the appropriate development and enlightenment of the people's character in the mother-tongue to the benefit of the fatherland and the joy of the king - this main issue takes the form of a reciprocal teaching and living interaction. It is the leaders' task to promote this on every side to their undying honour, according to the given circumstances. It will already be a great endeavour to describe this historically, so to work out mathematically or prescribe schematically this manifestation of life, this development of light, this conduction of heat is simply impossible. Poetically, one can sense and assume a good part of it, if one has a brotherly share in the people's nature and the mother-tongue. But even if I dared to appropriate such a share for myself - and did not resemble a passably

Danicised Friesian or an Anglo-Saxon rather than an ancient Dane - I would not find it appropriate here to describe my sweet dreams. This is partly because even the clearest use of imagery at the moment is obscure to most Danish readers and partly because it is of course always the *ideal* that one poetically describes. And from this a school, which is a living organism, is inevitably at its beginning at least as far distant from this ideal as the span of its own future development. For it is clear that books and everything resembling them will play as small and inferior a role as possible at the People's High School, where the goal cannot possibly be 'exams and a livelihood' but must be education and enlightenment - which is a private matter for everyone and is its own reward - and a cultural development and education for life. We can gain the clearest idea about this if we ask what the members of the People's State Council require in order to fill their positions and be equal to their tasks. To this belongs undoubtedly a living idea of a civil society existing for the common good, a living feeling of the people's distinctive character, an inner affection for the king and fatherland, an ability in the mother-tongue to express oneself in words with life and lightness, freedom and propriety, and finally, a clear overview of what we have and what we lack, based on reliable information about the state of the country. Yet it is equally clear that books and bookishness will at first play a very disproportionate role, partly because even the best leaders that can be found have most of their knowledge and wisdom from books and have come to resemble them far too much, and partly because for centuries the school in general has diligently preserved a deep gulf between life and the light, so that life grew constantly murkier and the light more vapid. Thus, it will inevitably take time and effort on both sides to fulfil the school's purpose of building a golden bridge over the gulf, and when that succeeds it will be to its undying honour!

We should therefore never ask what the People's High Schools in general or the Royal Danish High School in particular can accomplish at this moment, or to what extent they will succeed. Both depend on thousands of incalculable circumstances and, as with all desperate sicknesses, the only possible life-saving appliance should be grasped, even though it may probably fail. For if we continue with a school system that constantly separates life and learning even more, constantly eats up more of our love for the fatherland, increasingly loosens all the living ties that link us to it and one another, kills and mangles the mother-tongue that is the only natural expression of our thoughts and feelings, and persistently develops and fosters a boyish self-conceit and self-will and all manner of vanity, tinsel love, and greed for 'assured livelihoods', then we are deliberately digging our own grave! Then the misfortune must soon be too great to be overcome, the deep gulf too broad for any bridge, and even too broad to be flown over by any bird or poet of the people in a suit of feathers. If the People's High School could simply stop the awful race to death and destruction - and according to the laws of human nature it must be *able* to do so everywhere - then our gain would already be immeasurably great. And where it worked least, it would

nonetheless work much better by creating a competitive race, however feeble, for a people's life and civil happiness. I do not say this because I am in any doubt that especially in the North the People's High Schools will do wonders and that in the course of time the Royal Danish High School in particular will have what perhaps not the world but what the Danes will call the best, most beneficial, and blessed effects. I say it because a distrust of our own judgement and powers and a consequent softness and admiration for all things foreign - which is the Danish national flaw - will weaken the High School's effectiveness for a time, just as it has delayed its establishment.

However, if only its establishment is not delayed until the favourable moment has passed, it will surely contribute to the High School's appropriate formation and future flowering if we expect very little or nothing from it at first and draw on it sparingly.

For the more assuredly will it then exceed all expectations from the outset, and the more easily will a proper freedom and a decent discretion consolidate themselves. With such an innovation this is of particular importance from the outset, when bungling and errors of judgement cannot be avoided.

Finally, a brief word about our usual bee in the bonnet here in Denmark that if the Greeks, without knowing any other language than their own, achieved not only a civil but also an academic education which our scholars admire to this day, then the Danes on the contrary, should be unable without any foreign languages, to achieve even the civic education which by the laws of nature are bound to merge with the mother tongue!

Without embarking on a philosophical study of the folly of such a claim I shall only say that after a fairly good acquaintance with Danish literature, right from Holberg's *Peder Paars* to Ingemann's *Holger Danske*, I do not hesitate for a moment to state that most of our students are far from having as good an education as they themselves, without knowing a word of either Greek or Latin, could have enjoyed simply by acquiring what has been written in Danish. I also allow the well-considered claim to follow that while of course a profession can make an acquaintance with one or several foreign languages necessary, or even useful for the individual, there are at any one time only very few people who thereby acquire a real education, only the very few, that is, who have the aptitude, desire, and opportunity to encompass academically the human life in its entirety, which far from excluding the people's life actually embraces it!

The fact of the matter is that nowhere in the so-called educated world do the learned people who quite naturally speak out on educational matters know so little of their mother-tongue and what is written in it as in Denmark. And no wonder, for by the time the children who ate to cultivate the various disciplines are only 9 or 10 years old, they are normally regarded as so trained in the mother-tongue that they are now

clever enough to learn who knows how many foreign languages. Indeed in their naivety they consider it poverty in the mother-tongue when the wretched, ignorant boys cannot find words in it to express their *foreign* wisdom! They arrive at university with bits of two or three dead languages and a couple of living ones, especially learned through their grammar, without - as far as the school reigns - having 'wasted their time' on the works of a single Danish writer! Of course at university it is regarded as an excess that can have the most dangerous consequences if the student pursues what lies closest to the heart of us all, mankind and Danes alike. Instead they study for exam after exam where the questions are not about the mother-tongue and natural development but about what all manner of foreign books say, including some dreadful Danish books. When finally the academic course is completed and the graduate has it in writing that he possesses not only all the education he needs but also a good deal that he can mediate to others, all that he lacks is at the most a sweetheart to compensate for all the boredom of his learning and a livelihood as a reward for his long grind. And how many fewer will have the desire, the courage, and the strength to become small again in order to grow naturally, which they obviously must if they are ever to learn what the mother-tongue is fit for, or what is to be found in Danish books!

Far from exaggerating, I should like to add, God be praised: Things are not quite as bad as the Latin Grammar School aims to make them! A little Danish is smuggled in for quite a few of them, and I still remember with pleasure how as a 'Latin' schoolboy I read the ancient chronicles of Denmark of an evening in a shoemaker's workshop.

Such an experience is of course an exception, and as a Danish writer of thirty years standing, I have had more than enough opportunity to note and lament that the rule is unfortunately followed better than any other rule, even in the Latin Grammar Book. So however desperate it may seem to write in Denmark of the desirability of a Danish High School, nevertheless the need for an establishment for the cultivation of the mother-tongue and the discovery of what has been written in it is nowhere under the sun so great or so clear as sunlight as here in Denmark. And since evidently it is only the hope that such an establishment will be celebrated opportunely that has given both myself and every Danish writer with the least depth and seriousness the courage in such desperate circumstances to be so, why should I not hope, whatever the Latinists say, that it is now high time we at last succeeded!

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